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## Chapter Fourteen: The Data

The numbers glowed on the screen.

Mai sat at the terminal in the Foundation's analysis wing. Columns of data that shouldn't have existed. Containment metrics, operational efficiency ratings, team cohesion indices. The kind of information the Foundation collected on everyone, compiled on everyone, used to understand everyone.

Except this wasn't understanding.

The investigation had produced a report. Forty-seven pages. Detailed breakdowns of every mission, every success rate, every calculated risk. The document sat open on her screen, cursor blinking at a summary that made her jaw tight.

**Team Integration Assessment: Non-Standard Configuration Operational Dependency  
Rating: Critical Recommendation: Structural Reconfiguration Under Review**

"Structural reconfiguration." The words meant separation. They meant someone who'd never stood in a room with them had decided they knew better.

Ace stood at the window.

The analysis wing overlooked the Foundation's eastern compound. Concrete, purposeful, designed to make people feel small. At 120cm, Ace was already small. The architecture didn't bother her. What bothered her was the weight in the room.

Her katanas rested at her hip, dimmed to standby. Barely visible emerald glow in the afternoon light. No tremor in her hands. The Violet-fragment had been quiet since the demonstration mission. Waiting, maybe. Like it knew.

Shammy occupied the corner nearest the door.

She'd ducked entering without thinking about it. The doorframe was standard height. She wasn't. The air pressure in the analysis wing was wrong. Sterile, controlled, the kind of environment that made her atmospheric sense itch like a healing wound.

She held anyway.

"Forty-seven pages." Mai's voice cut through the sterile silence. Controlled. The tone she used when she was furious and refused to let it show. "They've been collecting data on us for three months. Since the promotion discussion."

"Since before." Ace didn't turn from the window. "Since they noticed we don't fit."

"We don't fit their forms." Mai's fingers pressed against the terminal's edge. "Their categories. Their checkboxes. Their understanding of how teams should work."

“So they want to make us fit.”

“They want to take us apart.”

The words hung there. Shammy's atmospheric presence shifted. Barely, just enough to make the sterile pressure in the room tolerable.

“They can't.” Her voice was warm despite the room. “We don't exist in pieces.”

“They think we do.” Mai's eyes stayed on the screen. “They think they can separate the vectors and still have vectors. Three people who work together can be three people who work apart. That's the assumption.”

“The demonstration mission proved otherwise.”

“The demonstration mission proved we're weaker apart.” Mai's fingers pressed harder. “That's what the data shows. But they're reading it as dependency. As liability.”

“They're reading it as a problem to solve.” Ace's voice carried the particular flatness of someone who'd been treated as a problem before. “We're the variable they can't calculate. So they want to remove us.”

The terminal hummed. The fluorescent lights buzzed.

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The meeting room was larger than the debrief room. More formal. The kind of space where decisions got made about people who weren't present to argue.

Three chairs faced a long table. Behind the table, four representatives from Foundation administration. Dr. Kessler was there. The same analyst who'd conducted their post-mission debrief, their promotion discussion, their careful dance around the word “arrangement.” Beside her, three others. Higher rank. More authority. The kind of people who signed off on investigations and structural reconfigurations without having to look at the people they were reconfiguring.

The triad entered together.

Ace first, compact and coiled. Mai second, measured. Shammy last, ducking the doorframe, atmospheric presence filling the room before her body finished crossing the threshold.

They took the three chairs without discussion. Ace on the left, Mai center, Shammy right. The triangle wasn't intentional anymore. It was structural.

“Thank you for coming.” Dr. Kessler's professional neutrality was the same as always. “We've completed our review of Team Integration Assessment 77-Beta. The findings are significant.”

“Significant.” Mai repeated it without inflection. Waiting.

“Your team's operational effectiveness shows heavy dependence on physical proximity and emotional interconnection.” Dr. Kessler's eyes moved across the terminal display on the table. “Success rates decrease approximately forty-three percent when operating separately. Recovery times increase by sixty-seven percent. Stress indicators, fragment pressure, burnout metrics, atmospheric

destabilization, all show significant improvement when the team is together versus apart.”

“This is presented as a problem.” Ace's voice. Statement, not question.

“This is presented as a finding.” A different voice. The man beside Dr. Kessler. Higher rank. Silver at his temples. “The Foundation's responsibility is to understand the assets we deploy. Your configuration raises structural concerns.”

“Structural concerns.”

“Dependency concerns.” He didn't flinch. “If your effectiveness requires you to be together, that's a single point of failure. Three operators who can't function independently isn't an asset. It's a vulnerability.”

The room's air pressure shifted. Shammy, adjusting without deciding to. Making the sterile space survivable.

“We function independently.” Mai's voice stayed precise. Calculating exactly how much to say. “We function better together. That's not dependency. That's optimization.”

“Optimization implies a choice. Your data suggests your configuration isn't chosen. It's required.”

“Required by what?”

“By your own metrics.” The man gestured at the terminal. “Psychological profiles indicating significant emotional attachment. Operational patterns showing protective instincts that override tactical logic. Recovery data suggesting that separation causes measurable harm to all three team members.”

“Protective instincts override tactical logic.” Ace's voice was sharp. “When?”

“During the demonstration mission. You took unnecessary risks to—”

“I took necessary risks to maintain survival.”

“The data disagrees.”

“The data wasn't there.” Ace's hands pressed against her thighs. The Violet-fragment stirred. Not awake, just aware. “The data doesn't know what it's looking at.”

“The data is objective.”

“The data is numbers.” Ace's eyes met his. Violet. Prismatic. “Numbers don't know what it costs to be apart from the people who hold you together.”

The man's jaw tightened. “Be that as it may—”

“It may.” Mai's voice intervened. “The Foundation has compiled forty-seven pages of data on our team. You've measured our effectiveness, our recovery, our cohesion. You've documented our weaknesses and calculated our dependencies.” She paused. Let the pause sit. “What you haven't done is ask us what any of it means.”

“We're asking now.”

"You're telling. You're telling us our configuration is a vulnerability. That our bond is a liability. That we'd be more valuable if we were less valuable to each other." Mai's fingers pressed together. "That's not asking. That's deciding."

"The Foundation isn't asking you to stop being—"

"The Foundation is asking us to operate as if we don't need each other." Shammy's voice entered the room. Warm despite everything. "That's the same thing."

"We're asking you to operate as if the Foundation matters more than your personal connections."

"The Foundation matters enough that we give it everything we have." Ace's voice carried no heat. Just the weight of fact. "Every mission. Every containment. Every risk."

"Then give us this."

"We can't." Mai's framework held steady. "Because what you're asking for is what makes us effective. Our bond isn't a side effect. It's the foundation. Remove it and you don't get three better operators. You get three broken ones."

"The data suggests otherwise."

"The data suggests we're weaker apart. You're interpreting that as a problem. We're interpreting it as proof that we're not meant to be apart."

Four administrators. Three operators. A terminal glowing with numbers that couldn't measure what mattered.

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Two hours.

They went through mission logs. Containment reports. Medical evaluations. Every engagement, every success rate, every moment the triad had operated as a unit versus moments they'd been forced to separate.

The numbers told a story. The administrators read it one way.

The triad read it another.

"When you split for the eastern approach on Mission 17-Alpha," Dr. Kessler said, "individual effectiveness ratings dropped by thirty-one percent. Why?"

"Because splitting isn't how we work." Mai's voice stayed precise. "We distributed. We didn't separate."

"The operational logs show three distinct engagement zones."

"We were tactically distributed." Mai's fingers pressed together. Hard. "The difference is I was calculating for Ace's position while she engaged. Shammy was stabilizing atmospheric conditions across all three zones at the same time. We were one system across three locations. That's not separation. That's distribution."

"The data doesn't show that."

"The data shows physical coordinates." Mai's eyes met Dr. Kessler's. "Not connection."

"Connection isn't quantifiable."

"Connection is everything." Ace's voice cut through. "Connection is why we succeed. Connection is why we recover. Connection is what you're trying to cut because you can't put a number on it."

"We're not trying to cut anything—"

"You're trying to understand by disassembling." Shammy's presence shifted. Making the sterile room feel different. Warmer, despite itself. "You want to take us apart and see how the pieces work. We don't work in pieces."

"Every team has been studied this way."

"Every other team you've studied exists in pieces." Mai's framework held. "They're individuals who work together. We're individuals who exist together. That's not the same thing."

"The distinction is semantic."

"The distinction is structural." Ace's hands pressed harder against her thighs. "You can take apart a machine and put it back together. You can't take apart a living thing and expect it to survive."

"You're not—"

"We are." Shammy's voice had warmth and something else under it. Steel, maybe. "Three parts of one organism. You can study us. You can measure us. But you can't separate us without killing what makes us valuable."

The terminal glowed. The numbers stayed where they were. Objective, unfeeling, telling a story the administrators couldn't read.

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The afternoon light was shifting. Amber beginning to push through the windows.

"Let me be direct." The senior administrator leaned forward. Silver temples. Highest rank at the table. "The Foundation's interest isn't in your personal life. We don't care who you love or how you arrange your domestic situation. What we care about is whether your configuration creates operational risk."

"It doesn't."

"The data suggests it does."

"The data suggests we need each other to function at peak capacity." Mai's voice carried calculation. Not defensive. Analytical. "That's not risk. That's information."

"Information that says if one of you is compromised, all three are compromised."

"Information that says if one of us is compromised, the other two can hold the field until recovery." Mai pressed her fingers together. "You're reading the weakness. You're not reading the strength."

“What strength?”

“94.7% effectiveness when standard teams operate at 78%. Recovery from atmospheric anomalies in hours instead of days. Containment perimeters that should require twice our numbers.” Mai's framework held. Not defensive. Just stating facts. “You're measuring the cost of our bond. You're not measuring the value.”

“The value is in your success rates.”

“The value is in everything we do.” Ace's voice. Flat. Certain. “But you don't understand it. So you think it's a problem.”

“We think it's unquantified risk.”

“Risk you can't calculate scares you more than risk you can.” Shammy's presence adjusted. “That's not data. That's fear.”

“The data—”

“The data doesn't know us.” Ace's hands pressed harder. “It knows numbers. Success rates and recovery times and operational coordinates. It doesn't know what happens when Mai calculates a threat and I move to meet it. It doesn't know what happens when Shammy holds space for both of us while we work. It doesn't know what it feels like to be three people who are also one thing.”

“Emotional testimony isn't—”

“It's not testimony.” Shammy's voice carried warmth and the steel under it. “It's architecture. It's how we're built. You can't disassemble architecture and expect the building to stand.”

The senior administrator's jaw tightened. Professional neutrality held. Barely.

“Is there anything that would change your assessment?” His voice carried something it hadn't before. Not openness exactly, but the space before a decision. “Any data we haven't considered?”

Mai's fingers stopped pressing. Her framework shifted.

“There is. But you don't have it.”

“What data?”

“Theta-24's operational integration assessment.” Mai's eyes met his. “The Walking War Crimes. You've studied them. Documented their chaos-vector methodology, their tactical unpredictability, their operational dependencies. What does their data show?”

“They're different.”

“They're similar. They operate as a unit. They have bonds that override tactical logic. They're effective because they're connected.” Mai's voice stayed precise. “What does their data show about team integration?”

“They're not—”

“They're not a triad. They're not romantic.” Mai's framework held. “But operationally, they're the

same thing. A unit that can't be separated without losing effectiveness. What does their data show?"

The senior administrator's eyes moved to Dr. Kessler. Dr. Kessler's eyes moved to her terminal.

"Theta-24's team cohesion metrics are the second highest in the Foundation." Her voice stayed professional. "Behind yours."

"And their recommendation?"

Dr. Kessler hesitated. The hesitation said everything before she spoke.

"Structural reconfiguration is not recommended for Theta-24." She was reading from a document now. "Their configuration is classified as asset-critical."

"Asset-critical."

"Removing any member would decrease team effectiveness below acceptable thresholds."

"And for us?"

Dr. Kessler hesitated again. Longer this time.

"Your assessment was... different."

"Because we're different." Ace's voice cut through. "Because what we are to each other doesn't fit your categories. Because you can't file us under 'professional team' and ignore what else we are."

"The Foundation's position—"

"The Foundation's position is that bonds like ours are tolerable if they're tactical. Unacceptable if they're emotional." Shammy's presence expanded. Making the sterile room feel something it didn't want to feel. "Theta-24 can have their chaos and their connection because it's professional. We can't have ours because it's personal."

"That's not—"

"That's exactly what you're saying." Mai's voice carried precision and something else now. The analytical framework couldn't contain it anymore. "You can accept that we need each other to fight. You can't accept that we need each other to live. That's not operational assessment. That's bias."

The meeting room was quiet. The terminal glowed. The afternoon light pressed through the windows.

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The door opened.

Not the side door. The main door behind the administrators. The one that connected to the upper floors of Foundation command, the one that didn't open during meetings like this.

A figure entered. Tall. Gray-uniformed. Rank that didn't appear in meetings like this, except when something had changed.

"Director Vasquez." The senior administrator's voice carried weight it hadn't carried before. "We weren't expecting—"

"I know." Director Vasquez moved around the table. Older than the administrators. Eyes that had seen more than reports. "I've been reviewing the Team Integration Assessment. All of them. Including the one you haven't discussed yet."

"The investigation is still—"

"The investigation is concluded." Director Vasquez's voice didn't invite argument. "As of thirty minutes ago. The recommendation has been filed."

Shammy's presence shifted. She'd sensed something before anyone else moved.

"Filed as what?" The senior administrator's professional neutrality cracked.

"Filed as: no action recommended. Team configuration classified as asset-critical. Structural reconfiguration denied." Director Vasquez's eyes moved across the triad. "The Foundation needs effective operators more than it needs operators who fit the forms."

"With respect, Director—"

"With respect, Commander, I've read the data. All of it. Including the Theta-24 comparison Agent Mai referenced." Director Vasquez's voice stayed level. "Even the chaos monkeys know they're better together. The Foundation isn't in the business of breaking things that work."

"But the emotional component—"

"The emotional component is what makes them work." Director Vasquez's eyes settled on Mai, then Ace, then Shammy. "We've tried the alternative. Standard teams. Standard configurations. Standard success rates. These three give us 94.7%. The question isn't whether their bond is acceptable. The question is whether we're smart enough to leave it alone."

The administrators held their positions.

"The investigation is closed." Director Vasquez turned to the door. "Your team configuration is approved. As is. The Foundation will adjust its forms to fit you, not the other way around."

The door closed behind her.

The silence that followed was different. Not sterile. Not hostile. Not the pressure of a room designed to make them small.

Just empty. Open. The absence of something that had been pressing against them for weeks.

The investigation was over.

---

Eighteen minutes back to their apartment. They didn't speak. Didn't need to. Ace's compact presence at Mai's left side, Shammy's shadow at her right, moving through Foundation corridors like something the walls had never been designed to hold.

The afternoon had shifted to evening by the time they reached their building. The door Shammy ducked without thinking. The space shaped by eighteen months of shared presence.

The apartment felt different when they walked in. Not just familiar. Something else. Shammy's atmospheric sense registered it before conscious thought. The way the space held them differently. Something that had been under siege for weeks, finally able to let go.

Ace went to her corner.

The meditation space. Shadow-pressure point. She sat cross-legged with her blade across her lap. But she didn't reach for the whetstone. Didn't start the maintenance rhythm.

She just sat there. Present. Not because she needed to recover. Because she could.

Mai went to her terminal.

The desk. The numbers. The framework that held her together when everything else threatened to come apart. But she didn't start calculating. Didn't pull up threat assessments.

She just sat there. Present. Not because she needed to analyze. Because she could.

Shammy stood in the center of the room.

Too tall for the architecture, but the architecture had adjusted months ago. The apartment's air pressure had shifted the moment they'd entered. Settling around them like something that had been waiting. She held space. Grounded. Present.

Not because she had to.

Because she could.

"We won." Ace's voice came from her corner. Not flat. Something else underneath it.

"We survived." Mai's voice came from the terminal desk. "There's a difference."

"Is there?"

"The Foundation backed off. That's survival. Winning would be them understanding why they were wrong." Mai's fingers pressed together. "They don't understand. They just decided to stop trying."

"Close enough."

"Not close enough." Shammy's presence expanded slightly. "They stopped because someone higher up intervened. Not because they accepted us. The forms didn't change. The bias didn't change. We got lucky."

"Lucky." Ace's blade caught the evening light. "I don't believe in luck."

"Director Vasquez made a decision. Decisions get reversed."

"Then we make them understand." Mai's framework held. "We show them what we are. Not by fighting their forms. By being too effective to disassemble."

"We've been doing that for eighteen months."

"We keep doing it." Mai's voice carried calculation. "Every mission. Every containment. Every moment we operate as a triad. We give them data they can't ignore."

"They ignored it for three months."

"They couldn't ignore Theta-24's data." Mai's eyes met Ace's. "That's what changed the equation. Not us. The chaos monkeys."

"Even the chaos monkeys know they're better together." Shammy's presence shifted. "That's what Director Vasquez said."

"Theta-24 isn't romantic." Ace's voice carried no judgment.

"Theta-24 is chaotic. Unpredictable. Everything the Foundation should want to control." Shammy moved toward the kitchen, folding through the doorway. "And the Foundation leaves them alone. Because they work."

"Because they work."

"Because even the team that breaks every rule, the Foundation knows better than to take them apart." Shammy's voice came from the kitchen. "That's where we are. Not romantic. Not emotional. Just effective. The Foundation is learning that effective matters more than categories."

"The Foundation is learning slowly."

"The Foundation learns at the speed of results." Mai's fingers pressed together. "We give them results. They learn."

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The evening deepened.

Ace rose from her corner. The Violet-fragment had settled completely. The pressure that had been building for weeks was gone. She moved toward the kitchen without thinking about it. Her body knew the route.

"Breakfast was interrupted," she said from the kitchen doorway. "We should eat."

"Breakfast was interrupted yesterday." Mai's voice came from the terminal. "And the day before. And every day for three weeks."

"We should eat anyway."

"We should." Mai's framework shifted. Something loosened. "We should do more than survive. We should live."

Shammy caught the word. Held it. Made it real by holding it.

"Live." Her voice carried warmth despite the weeks. "That's what we've been fighting for."

"The Foundation wanted us to prove we're worth keeping." Mai's voice carried something it hadn't in weeks. Precision with warmth, structure with room in it. "But that wasn't the real fight. The real fight was proving we have the right to exist as we are."

"As we are." Ace's voice came from the kitchen. The sound of cabinets. "Not as they want us to be."

"The Foundation doesn't get to decide what we are to each other." Shammy moved toward the kitchen. Folding through the doorway. "They deploy us. They measure us. But they don't define us."

"They tried."

"They failed."

"Because someone intervened."

"Because we made ourselves impossible to disassemble." Mai's voice carried calculation and something else. Something that sounded like certainty. "Not through luck. Through being what we are. The data they collected proved what we already knew."

"Which is?"

"That we're not separable." Mai's framework held. "Not because we're dependent. Because we're complete."

"Breakfast for dinner." Mai's voice carried something it hadn't in weeks. Warmth with structure. "That's what we're doing?"

"That's what we're doing." Ace's hands found ingredients. Familiar movements. The choreography of eighteen months. "Eggs. Rice. Tea."

"The sacred ritual." Shammy's presence wrapped around the kitchen. "The thing they wanted to understand and couldn't. The thing they have data on but can't measure."

"The thing we do because we're us." Mai moved to join them. Not because she needed to help. Ace could cook, Mai could cook, Shammy could modulate temperature with a thought. But because being in the kitchen together was the point. "Not because it's efficient. Because it's ours."

They ate on the couch, on the floor, in positions that shouldn't have worked but did. The way they always did.

No Foundation phones rang. No alerts. No investigations demanding attention.

Just three people. One meal. The ordinary thing they'd fought to protect.

---

Ace lay on the couch, compact frame taking up almost no space. Her katanas rested beside her. The Violet-fragment was quiet. Not suppressed. Not contained. Just at rest.

Mai sat on the floor, back against the couch, terminal dark beside her. Her framework had stopped running calculations. The numbers were silent. Not suppressed. They just weren't needed.

Shammy occupied the armchair. The one piece of furniture designed for her height. Her atmospheric presence filled the room. Not actively holding. Just present. The way air is present.

"They'll come back." Mai's voice broke the quiet. Not fear. Calculation. "The Foundation doesn't give up."

"Let them come." Ace's voice came from the couch. "We survived this."

"They'll find new forms. New categories."

"They'll fail." Shammy's presence expanded slightly. "Not because we'll fight them. Because we'll be what we are. And what we are doesn't fit in their forms."

"What are we?" Mai's framework stirred. Not calculating. Asking. "The data says we're dependent. The administrators said we're a vulnerability. What are we?"

The silence that followed wasn't sterile. Wasn't the pressure of a room trying to make them small. It was open. The kind of silence that could hold something true.

"Three people who found each other." Ace's voice from the couch. Still. Certain. "Three vectors that make a system."

"A living thing." Shammy's presence wrapped around them. "Something the Foundation can study but can't understand. Can deploy but can't control."

"We're us." Mai's framework held. The precision returned, but different now. Warmer. "Whatever that means. Whatever they try to make it mean."

The night pressed against the windows. The triad held. Three people who chose each other, not because they had to, but because they did.

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4:47 AM. Ace's meditation corner. Blade across her lap. Shadow-pressure settling into stillness. The pressure that had been building for weeks, the investigation, the data, the attempt to take them apart, had released. Not gone. At rest.

6:00 AM. Mai's coffee ritual. Precise. Two sugars. Timed to finish brewing exactly when Shammy drifted into the kitchen. But the framework had shifted. Not off. Calculating for something different now. Growth instead of survival.

6:03 AM. Shammy descended from atmospheric drift. The apartment caught her. Held her. The pressure that had been pressing against her for weeks, lifted.

Breakfast. Coffee. The rhythm of three people sharing one kitchen.

"The Foundation will call." Mai's voice. Not fear. Fact.

"Let them call." Ace's voice from her corner. "We'll answer together."

"Together." Shammy's presence wrapped around the kitchen. "That's how we work."

"The investigation is over." Mai's framework held. "The reconfiguration is denied. We have peace. For now."

"Peace doesn't last in our line of work," Ace said.

"No." Shammy's voice carried warmth despite the truth of it. "But this peace is earned. Not stolen. That matters."

The morning deepened. The triad held its architecture. Three vectors, one system.

Peace.

Not the absence of threat. The presence of each other.

They had survived. They had won.

And for one morning, maybe only one morning, but one was enough, they had peace.

The Foundation had data.

The triad had truth.

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